

Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. ³Thou hast multiplied the nation, *and* not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, *and* as *men* rejoice when they divide the spoil. ⁴For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. ⁵For every battle of the warrior *is* with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but *this* shall be with burning *and* fuel of fire. ⁶For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the increase of *his* government and peace *there shall be* no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Luke 2:1-20

¹And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ²(*And* this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. ¹⁵And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they had seen *it*, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all they that heard *it* wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things, and pondered *them* in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

And It Came to Pass

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: December 21, 2003

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Texts: *Isaiah 9:2-7*

Luke 2:1-20

Preachers are fairly warned that preaching on the high holy days needs be restrained. Preaching on the high holy days needs be restrained, not for fear of overwhelming the message of the text with brilliance, but rather for fear of detracting from the beauty and fullness of the Word by preaching on a lesser plane. On Christmas Sunday the preacher must account for the fact that he can hardly say it better than Isaiah and Luke. If the preacher were truly wise, he might just read the passages and sit down, silenced by their meaning and glory. Is it really necessary to say more than, “²The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light?” or “¹And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed?” Even just these beginning sentences capture our attention and enliven our imaginations. They seem to say it all.

So it is with no little trepidation that I preach this morning, mindful that the job is to not diminish the Gospel. But there are things to say, things that, with God’s help, may increase the meaning of the stories for us. So, I preach; I say a few things, praying to be of use.

Ray Brown, the Biblical scholar, has noted that the beginning of the Gospel of Luke contains essentially the whole Gospel in miniature. The infancy narrative, like the tightly wound layers of a seed, contains the whole of the story.

And from the beginning Luke juxtaposes the obvious power of the Roman empire and the apparent powerlessness of the story’s main characters. A decree regarding taxation goes out from Caesar Augustus. Cyrenius was the governor of Syria. The powers and the principalities rule the land. By the wave of a hand there comes a decree that sets a young pregnant woman and her betrothed on a long forced march to the man’s hometown. What a struggle it is. From what we can tell, they have no financial resources. The journey is unwise for one whose pregnancy is at full term. But decrees come from emperors and governors, and those who are affected, anonymous and unconsidered, can but comply. The decrees come from Rome, from the governor’s office, but the decrees send Joseph and Mary from one nowhere town to another nowhere town. Today there are few city names more recognized throughout the world than Nazareth and Bethlehem. But then, before the events we are talking about today made them famous, Bethlehem and Nazareth were nowhere towns; they were backwaters.

The differences could not be more stark. Caesar Augustus and Cyrenius were wealthy and powerful. When they snapped their fingers, things happened. They wore fine clothes. They traveled in style. Their family pregnancies were handled with royal pomp and circumstance. Joseph and Mary, on the other hand, are poor and ragged. They are powerless even over their

own lives. But it is through this poor and powerless couple that God has chosen to enter the world. Already we see the themes of the Gospel set in place.

A close look at the rest of the story of Jesus' birth gives us the whole Gospel in miniature form, as Brown says.¹

There's no room at the inn. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests says Luke; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," says Luke 9:58. In the gospel of John it says (1:9): "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." In the Gospel's Jesus is always left out, out of the mainstream, out of favor with the principalities and powers. He's the stone the builders rejected. It's just a few words, seemingly a passing comment: [They] laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. But that there's no room in the inn is not incidental to the story; this is how Jesus is treated from the beginning. From beginning to end there's no room. From beginning to end the have are uncomfortable with Jesus. Pilate doesn't know what to do with him. There's no room in Rome. The scribes and the priests sneer at him to cover their fear of him, fear that he will hold them accountable to the values and beliefs of their own religious tradition. There's no room for him in Israel. And now, before his birth, while in the womb of a shabby looking young woman and her betrothed, there's no room in the inn. So he must go out to the shed where the animals are. Out, out, out, out.... Jesus is the one left out, shut out, put out back. But real truth breaks in, the real truth breaks in on us when we recognize the stone the builders rejected is the cornerstone.

There's no room for them at the inn, and that's not incidental. It's not just filler and color for the story. It's not an accident. It's not even that they just happened to run into a particularly grumpy innkeeper. There's no room for them at the inn, because that, in miniature is the story of the Gospel of the Jesus, the son of God.

If Jesus is not accepted, then the reverse of that coin is who did welcome him? Who even knew that he was born? In Luke it is the shepherds. Again, this is not accidental. The shepherds were a pretty rough bunch. We have to shake free of some of our Christmas piety here. This is not some calm pastoral scene. It's not even the rather wilder scene of our own Christmas pageant. Shepherds in the first century were something like bikers, something like Hells Angels. Or maybe better, they were like the cowboys who come into town after weeks on the trail in those old western movies. They're wild and dirty and ready to party. They were the unwashed and unscrupulous. People locked their doors when they came into town.

These two set scenes, the holy family in the cattle shed because there is no room for them in the inn and the angels sending Hells Angels to be the first to greet the Christ child are miniatures for the Gospel. Always Jesus is rejected by those who should have recognized him and welcomed by those whom society had cast out.

It would be hard to overstate how much against the grain all this is. It's upside down. It's all wrong, in a way.

You know, I love Christmas. I love the power and the warmth of the story. And I love what God is begging us to see. God gives us this story that is so compelling that it is reenacted

¹I owe several of these insights to Paul Nuechterlein's notes on Lectures of the Florilegia Institute by Gil Bailie, Series: "The Gospel of Luke" Tape #2; Re: Luke 1-2.

in the churches year after year, that lures us in with those wonderful words, “¹And it came to pass in those days,” so compelling that literally billions of people are seized every Christmas season by its beauty and meaning.

And yet, now as then, God is begging us to see the real implications of this story. It is often said that if Jesus were to show up today, he would be crucified again. That is, he would again be rejected and unappreciated. In itself that is perhaps not surprising. Human beings remain human beings. But what has to be surprising is that he would be rejected, that he is rejected, by many who do so in his very name.

Jesus stood firm with the poor and the dispossessed, and the religious leaders told him that he should not associate himself with those on the wrong side of the tracks. They were sinners and ne'er-do-wells. They were outcast for a reason, he was told. But Jesus time and again pointed to the central tenets of the people's religious faith and asked them how they could possibly believe such rubbish. And yet still today it continues. The poor remain social outcasts. Indeed many good followers of Jesus still say that people get what they deserve, and so the unfortunate are unfortunate because of their own fault.

But perhaps even more amazing is how Jesus tried to stretch people beyond their hide-bound beliefs. Jesus promised newness of life. He promised freedom. He promised healing. He promised change. He promised a new day dawning. And perhaps there was nothing that made him more crazy than when people used their religious faith for exactly the opposite purposes. Time and again Jesus wrestled with those who thought that their religion ought to protect them from things becoming new, protect them from freedom and change. Jesus' opponents more often than not understood their religion to both ratify and insure that things remained the way they were. To them change and freedom and healing and newness of life were threatening, and they looked to their religious rules and structures to hold them at bay. They used the language of religion and morality to give authority to their distinctly irreligious and immoral points of view. No wonder they rejected him. No wonder they didn't recognize him.

In every age, when it becomes too comfortable in the culture, religion risks being co-opted, risks being employed for the very purposes against which it is meant to speak, risks being employed to keep things in place rather than to shake them up in order to create newness of life. Whether we talk of gay Bishops or same sex marriages or of the lack of support for those in society who have not the basic accouterments of food, healthcare and shelter, it is not hard to imagine where Jesus would have stood on these concerns.

It is not hard to imagine. Simply return to Bethlehem. Return to the innkeeper. Return to the manger. Return to the shepherds. Return to the words: “¹And it came to pass in those days.” It is not hard to imagine where Jesus stands. The only question is, will we stand with him? Amen.

Copyright © 2003 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.